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Sustainable development

Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly

United Nations reform: measures and proposals

Interaction between the United Nations, national parliaments and the Inter-Parliamentary Union

Note verbale dated 20 April 2016 from the Permanent Mission of Bangladesh to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

The Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of Bangladesh to the United Nations presents its compliments to the Secretary-General and, on behalf of Bangladesh in its capacity as Chair of the Governing Council of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, has the honour to transmit herewith the report of the Standing Committee on United Nations Affairs, adopted by consensus on 23 March 2016 by the 134th Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, held in Lusaka (see annex).

The Permanent Mission requests that the present note verbale and its annex be circulated as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda items 20, 120, 123 and 124.

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Annex to the note verbale dated 20 April 2016 from the Permanent Mission of Bangladesh to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

[Original: English and French]

Report of the Standing Committee on United Nations Affairs

Adopted by consensus on 23 March 2016 by the 134th Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, held in Lusaka

The President of the Committee, Mr. Anti Avsan (Sweden) opened the session welcoming participants.

Referring to the first two items on the agenda, Mr. Avsan invited the Committee to adopt the report of the previous session at the 133rd Assembly and elect three new members to the Bureau following nominations received by the geopolitical groups: Mr. Alexander Romanovich (Russian Federation), Ms. Afra Rashed Albasti (UAE), and Mr. Al-Fatish Izzeldin Al-Mansour (Sudan).

Mr. Romanovich having returned to the capital, was introduced by Mr. Kostantin Kosachev as a former member of the Bureau also from the Russian Federation. Ms. Albasti talked about her work with women and domestic violence and her interest in international affairs, particularly peacekeeping. As Mr. Al-Mansour was ill, he was absent from the room.

Mr. Avsan proceeded to introduce the two sessions on the programme, which he chaired.

Session 1: Interactive debate on the new election process for the UN Secretary General

Senator Graciela Ortiz, President of the Legislative Studies Committee (Senate of Mexico), and member of the Bureau of the IPU Committee on UN Affairs; Mr. Konstantin Kosachev, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Council of the Federation, Russia; and Ms. Yvonne Terlingen, Representative of the 1 for 7 Billion Campaign

This session provided members with an opportunity to comment on a new appointment process for the selection of the United Nations Secretary-General (UNSG) as outlined in a Secretariat background note. The note traced the history of the appointment process over 70 years of the United Nations and showed that most of the applicable rules are derived by practice and not from the UN Charter. It is possible for member States to change these rules by a resolution of the General Assembly.

As part of the ongoing reform process of the United Nations, a large number of member States have demanded that the appointment of the UNSG be more transparent and inclusive of the entire membership, through the General Assembly, and not confined to the 15-member Security Council where five permanent members (with veto power) hold most of the decision-making authority. A more democratic selection process would help ensure the impartiality of the UNSG and empower him or her to act as a true representative of the "peoples" referred to in the UN Charter.

The background note proposed seven questions for discussion inquiring into the qualifications for the post of UNSG, the renewability of the term of office, and considerations for gender balance as well as regional representation. Most importantly, the note invited a reflection on the key question of whether the General Assembly should hold a real election and not be limited to approving the one candidate recommended by the Security Council. This would require the Security Council to submit to the General Assembly more than one name.

Elaborating further, Ms. Terlingen gave a detailed presentation of a new appointment process the General Assembly adopted in resolution 69/321 of September 2015. Mr. Kosachev and Ms. Ortiz acted as respondents to her presentation. The following fifteen delegations contributed comments and questions afterwards: Bangladesh, Bahrain, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Canada, Cuba, Kenya, Morocco, the Netherlands, Portugal, Uganda, South Africa, United Kingdom, United Arab Emirates, and Zambia.

Ms. Terlingen noted that while the new appointment process represents a step in the right direction, it does not go far enough. She noted two important innovations: first, government-nominated candidates must submit their CVs to the President of the General Assembly and all CVs must be posted online; second, the General Assembly can convene informal public hearings with the candidates. The new process also more explicitly than ever invites woman candidates to come forward and stresses the need to consider gender diversity in this process — which so far has always led to the appointment of only men.

From the standpoint of the 1 for 7 Billion campaign (an umbrella organization of 750 civil society organizations), the new rules should limit the mandate of the UNSG to a single non-renewable term (possibly extended to seven years) in order to enhance the political independence of the UNSG from the P5 and other key members whose support he/she needs to be re-elected. Most of all, the rules should allow the General Assembly to hold a vote on a slate of at least two nominations from the Security Council.

Ms. Terlingen said "the UNSG represents the conscience of the world and plays an important role in helping Member States rise above their national interests". It is important that his or her selection be as inclusive and representative as possible. To this effect, she suggested that parliamentarians should play a role in the process by holding debates on the qualifications required for the post; by helping identify qualified candidates; by scrutinizing the eventual nominations; by proposing questions to be asked of the candidates at the hearings of the General Assembly; by insisting that the UNSG be free to appoint his/her cabinet based on merit alone (i.e., not as patronage appointments); by advocating a single term of office; and, by insisting that the Security Council submit more than one recommendation to the General Assembly, thus making the process more democratic.

In his response, Mr. Kosachev cautioned that any changes to the current system must be carefully considered bearing in mind the long-term consequences. This year's new process, which will lead to the appointment of a new UNSG effective January 2017, is not the only window of opportunity to make changes. For Mr. Kosachev, the mandate of the UNSG as defined in the Charter is primarily of an administrative nature, as head of the Secretariat. The UNSG's political functions are very limited and subject to guidance from the General Assembly. From this

standpoint, it is not wrong for the UNSG to be dependent on the membership instead of being empowered to act alone.

According to Mr. Kosachev, regional rotation of the UNSG is welcome so that the whole world will eventually be represented in the position. Gender balance is also welcome, provided the best qualified person is chosen in the end. On the question of term limits, Mr. Kosachev disagreed with the argument that a single term is more empowering than two consecutive terms. On the key question of whether the P5 members of the Security Council should retain the power to veto a nomination, Mr. Kosachev argued that this system is much more constraining than people think because it forces the P5 and indeed the whole membership of the Security Council to come to consensus.

Ms. Ortiz remarks as a discussant focused on the gender aspects of the selection process. She welcomed that more member States were supportive of women candidates and hoped this would lead to a woman to be elected for the first time in 2016. While noting that the Security Council's control of the process is not democratic, Ms. Ortiz worried that the gender composition of the Security Council is another issue that needs to be addressed. If the Council is to remain in control of the selection, and if the selection is equally open to women as it is to men, then the Council itself needs to be reformed to ensure gender parity. A male-dominated Council is less likely to pick a woman candidate than one in which women are equally represented.

In the ensuing debate with delegates, while a few of them expressed general satisfaction with the status quo, most participants expressed support for further democratization of the UNSG appointment process. These interventions clearly signalled that the selection process must become transparent and involve all member States, not just those who sit on the Security Council, and reinforced the view that the UNSG is accountable to the more representative General Assembly. Two interventions went farther, recommending that the process should end with a vote by the General Assembly on more than one candidate, as is the practice at the IPU. Three interventions supported the idea of a single, non-renewable term.

The debate showed strong support for women candidates to be considered. One intervention specifically suggested that the focus should not be limited to inviting women candidates but more importantly to making sure a woman is actually elected. Several UN agencies have been or are being led by women and there is no question that highly qualified women are available to take the top job of UNSG. To ensure gender balance in the outcome of the selection process, one delegate suggested that a gender "rotation" should be instituted so that the UNSG post will alternate between a man and a woman (i.e., presumably, this will require admitting only male candidates or only female candidates on each occasion).

That parliaments should have a role in the selection process came through quite strongly in the debate. Several speakers expressed support for many of Ms. Terlingen's recommendations, particularly the idea that parliaments hold debates on their governments' nominees and even submit their own proposals. A specific suggestion from the floor was that parliaments need to support the UNSG in his/her efforts to implement key administrative reforms that are required to strengthen the United Nations.

Concluding the debate, participants asked the IPU to transmit the following there questions to all candidates in the running this year:

1. Agenda 2030 will be successful if members of parliament are involved in the development of their national action plans, in monitoring implementation, and in aligning budgets and legislation to the agenda. As UNSG, will you advocate with member States for parliamentary engagement in the implementation of the new 2030 Agenda and attendant SDGs?

2. Numerous GA resolutions and UNSG reports recommend a strong relationship between the UN and national parliaments, as well as with the IPU. As UNSG, what specific actions would you take to strengthen these relationships at global and national levels to more effectively serve the people?

3. As representatives of the people, parliamentarians want to ensure a more democratic UNSG selection process. How do you think parliamentarians, through the IPU, the world organization of parliaments, can have a role in this process?

Session 2: Briefing on the institutional arrangements for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals

Mr. Laszlo Borbely, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Chamber of Deputies of Romania; Ms. Paddy Torsney, Permanent Observer of the IPU to the United Nations; Mr. Alessandro Motter, Senior Advisor for economic and social affairs, IPU; Mr. Charles Chauvel, Parliamentary Advisor, Democratic Governance Group, UNDP

Further to a decision of the Bureau at the October 2015 session, the overarching aim of this session was to provide the Committee with a structure enabling it to work as the IPU's main body for a regular review of SDGs implementation over the next 15 years. The panel presented various approaches and elaborated on several concrete suggestions.

After presenting an overview of various new or established review mechanisms, Mr. Motter described the entry points for parliaments to engage in SDGs implementation at three levels: national, regional and global. At the national level, a key role for parliaments is to deepen national ownership of the goals and to ensure a national plan to localize the goals is firmly in place. Key to the accountability role of parliaments is that their governments present to them an annual report of progress on the implementation of the plan. At the global level, Mr. Motter noted, parliaments have an opportunity to contribute to the work of the new High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on sustainable development that will be the main UN hub for an annual global progress review. Among other things, parliaments should participate in national voluntary reviews and join their national delegations to HLPF sessions.

An initial step all parliaments can take towards implementation is to adopt a motion or a resolution on the SDGs. Mr. Avsan introduced a template resolution the IPU has prepared. He noted that the parliaments of Mali and Trinidad and Tobago have already adopted resolutions and encouraged all delegations in the room to follow suit. He reported that several members of the Bureau, such as Canada, Sudan, Morocco, Norway and Sweden, had pledged to table a resolution this year.

The IPU is gearing up to help parliaments institutionalize the SDGs. Ms. Torsney provided one illustration of this in the form of a self-assessment toolkit the IPU will publish in May. She invited members interested in providing feedback to the toolkit, which is still in draft, to contact her. The delegations of Mali and Lesotho expressed an interest in being part of this exercise.

Exploring the regional level of implementation and review, Mr. Borbely highlighted the case of the Eastern European region. His parliament was host to a regional conference on the SDGs last year and will again convene a meeting in April of this year. He noted how all SDG-related processes present an opportunity to strengthen parliaments' accountability role. In his parliament, the sub-committee for sustainable development will have a key role in mainstreaming the SDSs in the committee system, strengthening policy coherence. He urged the IPU to integrate the SDGs in its new five year strategy and to focus on assisting parliaments in institutionalizing the SDGs in their day-to-day work.

For his part, Mr. Chauvel outlined how the UN is gearing up to help parliaments implement the SDGs at the country level. He recalled that the 2030 Agenda rests on open, inclusive and participatory reporting, a people-centred approach, and evidence-based support. He noted that there is strong agreement in principle that parliaments are a key stakeholder in implementation, along with civil society and other actors, but this will not translate automatically into action to engage or support the parliaments. Proactive efforts will be required. Some of the impetus will need to come from citizens themselves. To help with this, the UN will retool the existing My World survey facility so that people can use it to provide feedback on government policy and services directly to their members of parliament.

The following delegations participated from the floor debate: Cuba, France, Kenya, Mali, Morocco, South Africa, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, and Zimbabwe. Their comments elaborated on some of the points made by the panel with further ideas and suggestions. Several comments in particular pointed to the need to strengthen parliaments to allow them to play a strong role in implementation. Two interventions elaborated on the role of the national sustainable development plan as the centerpiece of implementation in each country.

It was agreed that each spring session of the UN Committee will henceforth be utilized to perform three basic tasks: to take stock of global progress on the SDGs (UN reports); to prepare concerned parliaments for the voluntary national reviews to the HLPF; to prompt parliaments to perform a self-assessment of their capacity to implement the SDGs and to showcase best practices in that regard.